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THE IDEALS OF THE PROFESSION¹

The older and more experienced the human race grows, the more attention men pay to the world they live in, both the physical and the spiritual. Accumulating knowledge makes life more and more intricate. The solution of one problem leads to other problems before unknown. Old subjects assume new phases and new subjects enter the field. Education is not to be compared to a placid lake, but to a swift, widening river. Today we take our bearings by fixed objects along the shore, and tomorrow we can no longer use our reckonings.

If it were possible to plot as a curve the average education of each century for the last three thousand years, studying particularly the tendency to rise from the dead level, we should be amazed at the higher reaches of the lines of the last few centuries. Remember, I refer to average lines, taking into account the whole century and all progressive countries, not to the lines of individual brilliant men, which, even in dark ages and backward countries, often shoot far above any level hitherto reached, to heights before undreamed of. But every time one such bold line soars aloft it lifts all later lines a little bit higher.

Education is a process of self-culture under influences, in the home, the school, and the church, all three more or less simultaneously, but completed for the most part out in the world. Ideals are formed in the home, the school, and the church; they are put to the test in the world. Knowledge is acquired through

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all these agencies; it is tested in the world. Some of the teaching of early life may not stand the test of experience, and may have to be discarded, perhaps with pain and regret. Much may in time be found to have no further usefulness and be painlessly forgotten. These experiences are common to all educated people. Correction of error, clarifying of perspective, overcoming of prejudice, and broadening of sympathy, these are the basic processes of education.

In a well built monument every piece that enters into the structure has the proper size, shape, and material. So it is with a well ordered education. If one part is too small or too large, or its shape does not fit the design of the whole, the harmony of the finished structure is marred. If one bit of material is defective it is sure to be discovered and will have to be replaced. But the great accuracy and full knowledge with which an education should be designed needs no further illustration before such a body as this. The seriousness of the matter, however, is not universally recognized.

Most of the defects in the American educational system are well enough known to most of our live educators, but unfortunately not to most of the lay officials clothed with political authority over them. And yet if there is any one part of the system to which comprehensive expert knowledge is absolutely indispensable it is the court of final appeal. But as a nation we have not yet grasped that idea. We are still too young, too conceited, too full of inertia, too given to saying that what was good enough for father is good enough for me,—a reactionary doctrine which lies like a mountain of death athwart the path of progress.

Who is to overcome this inertia and lack of vision? The teaching profession. We must not neglect the youth under our care, neither must we fail to see to it that the older public, at least the next generation, if not this, is enlightened and inspired with loftier ambitions. Our educational ideals need to be raised to the proper level. They need also to be clearly defined and made a matter of public pride. When that is accomplished, our country, the youngest of the greater nations, may erect as a companion piece beside the statue of Liberty enlightening the world another statue of Enlightenment liberating the world.

What I have said thus far bears on all branches of our educational system, more or less. We here are concerned primarily with one of these branches, that of modern foreign languages. We are here to discuss their proper place in our general curriculum, and more specifically the ideals of foreign language instruction and how to realize them.

The time in life when it is easiest to learn modern foreign languages is early childhood. Isn't it strange that this fact, so well known to the world as well as to educators, is not reflected in the course of study of our schools? To be sure, teachers who could employ a method suitable for eight-year-old pupils are few and far between. But they could be produced if wanted. And it would be easy enough to make a place for foreign languages by eliminating the stupid repetitions of work in the graded schools, which serve chiefly the purpose of holding back the bright pupils till the dull ones can catch up with them. It would in fact be a real blessing if the curriculum were enriched at the bottom, so that our young children could have more steaks and chops to eat instead of such an overdose of hash.

It is a mistaken notion that thin dilutions of the strong mental pabulum of mature humans is the best food for the delicate minds of children. Unquestionably, such a dietary lightens the burden of the cook, but is that a worthy motive for its selection? Haven't we about reached the point where we can afford a bill-of-fare better adapted to child nature?

Children have such wonderful imaginative power, and imitative power, and emotional capacity, all of which begin to wane as soon as the little ones are introduced to the grind of big folks' studies, which lead to self-consciousness and discouragement with a consequent lowering of ideals. How little children do love a story told concretely! How they enjoy hearing it over and over, even after they know it by heart! How quickly they learn one in a foreign language, almost unconscious that the language is foreign. And what past masters they are at deriving the meaning of a word from its context! They use their visualizing faculty, and their thinking is concrete, till they are initiated into the meaningless mysteries of English spelling and the abstract logic of mathematics, a treatment which only a persistent fancy can survive.

Instead of giving children the one important thing they could most easily learn while young, viz. a modern foreign language, but which they will find more and more difficult the older they grow, we give them some other things which are hardest in childhood and easiest later on. In other words, we deliberately, or perhaps thoughtlessly, make the acquisition of an education as difficult as possible. Apparently it is not the actual achievement that we delight to see, but the struggle against a handicap. I have known teachers who adhered to the principle that as soon as pupils show signs of becoming able to do the thing in hand they must be shifted to something they cannot begin to do. This style of pedagogy reminds me of that sometimes applied to roosters to keep them from crowing in the early morning. They are made to roost on perches so close to the roof that there is no room to get their heads high enough to crow. I hope you realize that roosters thus treated need sympathy.

The period when the imitative and imaginative faculties are most active, and repetition of things known does not bore, but entertains, viz. childhood, is the logical time to lay linguistic and literary foundations, and to give these most human of studies such an impetus that the purely intellectual studies which enter the field later will not be able entirely to choke out the things that make for culture of the spirit. For cultured taste and feeling are absolutely indispensable for a people that aspires to a leading part in the higher life of the world. And we certainly want our "land of the free and home of the brave" to be noted, not only for its practical inventions, commercial enterprises, and personal liberty, but also for its education and refinement.

Perhaps I ought to say in this connection that the foreign language instruction I am advocating for elementary schools is intended for American children, not for children of foreigners. The latter can gain some of the good results of foreign language study by learning American English, which it is impossible for them to master too well.

When we compare the output of our schools with that of some of the leading countries of Europe and find that in actual mental equipment our graduates are about two years behind, does this not suggest that there may be some room for improvement somewhere? True, our children may have more mastery of

things not in the ordinary school curriculum, which may help to restore our pride after the unfavorable comparison in things scholastic, but it is not at all necessary that superiority in practical matters should be accompanied by inferior scholastic attainment. We would not for anything forego our practical accomplishments, but we would, if we could, make our scholastic equipment at least as good as the best. Not from a spirit of jealous rivalry, which would be vulgar, but from the conviction that nothing but the best is good enough.

Why is it that we fall so far behind? Not because our children have inferior mental capacity, but partly because we are satisfied with inferior mental attainments. Not because we have less devoted teachers, but partly because we put up with inferior organization and administration, out of loyalty to the American system. Not because our children are lazy, but partly because our traditional course of study is the outgrowth of primitive conditions, a compromise, made while the bulk of our thought and energy had to go toward opening up and settling the country and developing its resources. So we must not be too impatient with the present, but we must not be content with a future no better than the present.

Something must be done to equalize the drift toward commercialization; otherwise the dollar ideal will become all-dominant, and we shall be known as a monied middle-class nation. Our educators must not be satisfied with mediocrity. We must aspire to contribute liberally to the higher life of the world.

In order to do this we must know the leading contributing nations of the past and present, and here is where the instruction in foreign languages looms large. That we begin this instruction too late has already been pointed out. That we devote far too little time to it to achieve results that count is, in my judgment, one of the chief defects of our course of study. The public knows that the results are not what they should be, and I have recently read editorials in Ohio newspapers advocating the elimination of all foreign languages from the public schools, on the ground that pupils fail to acquire even a reading knowledge of them. The writers of these editorials are obviously too uneducated to give value to their judgment. But their utterances may serve to point out a danger that threatens from below. The real

remedy is to expand the modern language curriculum, and modernize the pedagogy where the progress of the last thirty years has yet to be heard of.

Another defect in our procedure is the study of a dead language before a living one, which results in less satisfactory attainments in both, and in lower aims and poorer methods in both, than if the languages were taken up in the reverse order. Against this point of view vociferous protests are to be expected from some teachers of Latin. But they fought tooth and nail to keep modern languages off the program as major subjects, and when they were finally forced to receive them into the house they treated them as Cinderellas and Latin remained the haughty sister.

There may be still some language teachers who would contend that the grammar, let us say, of French is not to be compared to the grammar of Latin. Even if that were true, what of it? It is not systems of declensions and conjugations that enrich the inner life, but the thoughts, experiences, and ideals, contained in the literature of the language, and in this regard the superiority of French over Latin is beyond question. It is contact with the human element in literature that is vital. The formal art of expression is second in importance, though very important. But even here French has nothing to fear from a comparison. However, I would not think of eliminating Latin from the curriculum. I would only put it in its logical place, a few years after a modern language has been taken up. It is only common sense to begin with the easier and less remote and then proceed to the harder and more remote. In view of these facts it behooves us to see to it that the modern languages are so effectively taught that their logical place will be conceded to them in the future course of study.

That there is room for the improvement in the teaching of modern languages is frankly admitted by the teachers themselves. And just now a most determined effort to effect the needed improvement is well under way. It has resulted in an almost national federation of modern language teachers' associations, our far western states being the only part of the country not yet organized and affiliated. I should qualify this statement by saying that one of the regional associations of this coast has

affiliated with the Association of the Central West and South, in order to be identified with the reform. In harmony with this movement toward federation among high school and college teachers, the Modern Language Association of America, composed largely of college and university teachers interested in research, has recently attacked with vigor and determination the problem of the university or collegiate training of high-school teachers of modern languages. The higher institutions of learning recognize that they are in large measure responsible for whatever may be lacking in the preparation of secondary-school teachers, and they propose to find out the evils of the system and the remedy for them. A report of very great importance bearing on this problem is now in preparation by a national committee and may be expected within a year.

This report, when it does appear, should interest high-school teachers as well as college professors. For poor teaching anywhere along the whole course from the bottom to the top affects the teaching everywhere else along the whole course. Poor work in the university means poor work later in the preparatory school, and poor work in the preparatory school means poor work later in the university. Likewise, the standard of teaching in one language affects in some measure the standard in another. Hence the great need of coöperation of all teachers of all modern languages, and, I hasten to add, of all foreign languages, ancient and modern. It would be difficult to foretell all the good that might come from the unselfish coöperation of these groups of educators. The ideal is worth dreaming of.

Education is a misfit if it does not contribute to the harmony of life in the individual, the nation, and the world. The poets and prophets of the ages have discovered the harmonies of life and bequeathed them to the world in their writings. Qualified teachers can point the way to these great cultural treasures, but pupils can gain possession of them only by earning them. Reading them in translations is like studying etchings of great paintings. They give only partial satisfaction. The original language is to the poem what the plumage is to the bird of paradise. It takes the whole original to produce beautiful harmony. There is poetry in the teaching of foreign poetry.

Viewed from a national standpoint, our public schools are

great melting pots, which receive throngs of children of different national inheritance and home traditions, and turn out patriotic young Americans. They have at the same time another important related function to perform. The product must not be provincial, but cosmopolitan, in understanding and appreciation. The ideal must be broad-gauge culture, enjoying freedom of spiritual intercourse with cultured foreign peoples, and contact with all nations, contributing liberally to the spread of enlightenment and to the realization of the brotherhood of man. In the attainment of this ideal there can be no more powerful factor than the thorough study of modern foreign languages, not only in our country, but throughout the whole world.

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